

Ben Jonson:

Now that the Winter years hang heavy on this
no longer burly frame, now that my step
is faltering and I have but a few
scorched books left, nothing to attract young scholars
as in the days before my treasure house
collection died in flames, now that I've lost
the favour of the court, am out of date,
with few to buy my plays or masques or poems,
with none to print my Second Folio,
it's balm from Gilead to have you call.

You ask this garrulous old laureate
to search the mists of ancient memories
for great days at the Curtain, Globe, and Mermaid.
I often wonder why a few of us
won fame while others, once our closest Fellows,
were trapped in shallows and in woes yet had
rare talents, even genius. Today I have
been haunted by a long forgotten playwright
who promised in bud-luscious Spring to be
our English Plautus, maybe Sophocles.

Ah, kind Young Man, you brought a gift!
All ancients mellow with Canary wine:
this has a bouquet like King James' best keg.
You are the last, one of the best of all
the Tribe of Ben, for you must know my word
means naught to arrogant and boorish Charles.
I have outlived my time. But halt! No more
digressions. My obscure young poet was
some years my senior. Oh, what was his name?
'T was sugar on my tongue-tip, but old men
have cloudy memories. I'm going back
nigh forty years. I knew him five or six.

Would that I'd met him as a lad a-bubbling
over the dramas strolling players brought
each Spring into the innyard of Boar's Head
in his river-crossing home in Gloucester
(or could it be Worchestershire's Red Lion?).
After the last huzzahs, our lad sought out
the lesser players, the ill-paid Hired Men,
bought them penny pots of Maimsey wine
for tales of gypsy wanderings from shire

to shire with tragedies like Gorboduc
and comedies on Latin models like
Ralph Roister Doister and Endimion.
Spellbound by voices that evoked rich worlds,
restless like all youths for a new horizon,
our lad might well have joined a troupe of players
in his native shire. Perchance his "buskin tread"
across full half our green and precious isle
while he, with other Hired Men, daydreamed
the harvests of Share-Players soon might be their own.

Perchance he came to Town in the Glorious Year.
Put it this way, Young Man, our grandeur starts
with Fifteen Eighty-Eight. We could have been
the serfs of Papal Spain but for the rout
of the Great Armada. It brought our Golden Age
much as the Greeks had theirs on trouncing Persia.
Our glory also dawned that year of years
with Marlowe's strutting Tamburlaine the Great
enchanting us with that new mighty line
that married poetry and eloquence
and could be tender as a baby's kiss.
That also was the year of Thomas Kyd,
our Senecan, whose Spanish Tragedy
revealed the great theme of revenge and startled
the world with eerie ghosts. Our glory has
another side: a frigid Nether World
where slave mart trades were made in poets' brains
and their hearts' blood, where actors were oft serfs.

Now enters Philip Henslowe on the stage:
long gone the early days when he was just
a bailiff's servant, who acquired a hoard
by marrying his master's aging widow.
He laid her money out in Southwark land
below the Thames, outside the Lord Mayor's rule.
An early playhouse -- 't was the Rose -- stood near
Bear Garden, raucous with wild mastiffs' snarls,
the cries of dying bears, sub-human shrieks
as if the Borough was Rome's Coliseum.
There loomed the Debtors' Clink, the swampy fields
where Winchester's Lord Bishop leased some land
to Henslowe. Heavy were the profits from
Winchester geese housed in their Bankside Stews
and patronized by all of London's sports.
Our groatsworth-greedy Henslowe weasled next
into Bear Garden's ownership, became
a sanctimonious vestryman and warden
but on six other days he kept collecting
his whorehouse bundles.

His stepdaughter Joan, the bailiff's child, proved key to another fortune. A cunning mouse, she caught the roving eye of ranting, guinea-reaping Edward Allyn, all London's favorite as Tamburlaine and as Hieronimo from tragic Spain. The father and the son-in-law rebuilt the Rose and then the apt-named Fortune, modeled upon the Globe. As landlords they knew all the devious and Machiavellian arts of tempting Actor-Sharers into debt. To glitter in a single velvet cloak would cost full twenty pounds. Ah, many men were wrecked between the Scylla, Henslowe's pawnshop, and Charybdis, the nearby Debtors' Clink. Pour me another glass! Would you believe his Hired Men were paid five shillings weekly the first twelve months and only ten the third?

My Midland Hopeful hardly could avoid a term with Bankside's Mephistophilis who owned the quicksand all around Parnassus. Our bard was first mere Hired Man, then Actor, began to doctor plays historical, making old verses ring like Marlowe's lines, providing Allyn with bravura speeches. He'd also borrow Plautus's tricks and ape Rob Greene in comedy -- for paltry shillings. We were the lowest paid of all the serfs: four pounds was long the price for five full acts -- one fifth the cost of a single velvet cloak! An extra pound would bring a Mermaid party.

O Dominus vobiscum! The saddest year we ever had was Fifteen Ninety-Three. The Plague made London-town a charnel house where the dead were stacked like cordwood in the streets. All playhouses were closed that hungry year. Unable then to act or pen new dramas our Midland Youth turned to another model: Kit Marlowe's Hero and Leander, left unfinished like a Venus without arms but with ripe pears of breasts, a cherry mouth that stirred up passion in young men who read the fragment passed around in manuscript.

Our Bard, with his long poem, for once was lucky: a hometown crony had a printing shop hard by St. Paul's. Result: quick publication

of his Ovidian rhymes (before Kit Marlowe's) and largess from a noble Lord saluted in one of those too fulsome dedications. It soon became the joy of all young blades in the Inns of Court. He followed with another. The two had lovely lines and florid fluff. Those narratives might still be kept in print if our obscure man had composed a few more memory-hugging plays that might have stirred his Fellows to collect his early works lost like Troy's gold and most of Aeschylus.

Act Four: the ghastly Plague Year ends. It seems the spreading stench of this Black Death requires the White Death of the frost. In primrose time our troupes began regrouping shattered ranks: too many had been dumped in common graves. Far worse, three of our greatest bards were gone: Kit Marlowe in that tavern brawl, Rob Greene in a hovel, Tom Kyd in some mouldy dive. Our playgoers were hungry for a bard to fill the void. It could have been our lad. It was that tide in the affairs of men that should be taken at the flood. The winds of fortune brought our bard a golden offer: a Partner's share for writing and for acting with the Burbage boys whose father built the first of London's showshops called The Theatre. They had a splendid troupe, produced my own first geat success, Every Man in His Humour.

Our playwright, standing at that fateful crossroad, clashed early with proud Richard Burbage over a wench with flashing eyes and cayenne temper. Then he rejoined Ed Allyn's troupe. It didn't seem such a wrong, dark road until he fell into old Henslowe's web: first one small loan, another with Shylock's interest, and he was trapped: 't was low pay or the clink. At first, a hero-worshipper, I rushed to see each play my favorite composed but found, alas, that he'd sunk in a rut. His Master, Edward Allyn, sought just one Hieronimo after another, forced our hopeful to grind out bombastic speeches.

With reputation shabby as his clothes, he shunned the Mermaid, but I heard his voice speak from an empty chair. His shadow lurked

behind my shoulder till I sought him out
by touring all the cheaper Bankside pubs.
My friend looked haggard, cheeks foretold a skull's.
His sunken eyes lit up to see he wasn't
forgotten by one of the Mermaid crowd.
He sneezed, said he'd caught cold in Debtors' Clink.

"Kept there too long. The reason: stubbornness.
I lost my temper, told Pimp Henslowe bluntly
where he could go for bidding just five pounds
for my next play. He called me raving mad
because I tried to jack the fee to ten,
a price paid crow-voiced poetasters who
had dice-tossed luck to be outside the Clink."

My poor friend broke into a racking fit
of coughing, spat out blood. "Dear Ben," he said
at last. "The Muse has not deserted me.
That bastard Henslowe let me rot too long,
compelled the rebel bard to take his pittance.
O Ben, I've something up my ravelled sleeve:
that blessing of all poets, new ideas.
I need to get away, breathe country air,
lie lazily beneath a greenwood tree
up in my native shire. I hear birds call:
Come hither, come hither, come hither. There was
a time I dreamed of purchasing a big
half-timbered house up in my birthplace town
to show all scornful folks the wayward youth
struck gold in London. Ah, I need a refuge
for Plague-cursed months, a place to help restore
my soul. There's magic in a simple meadow
with freckled cowslips, burnet and green clover.
I've tasted far too much of wormwood here.
Back in that tomb I had one seed-time book,
North's Plutarch, with a noble rendering
of Brutus's tragedy. I've writ five acts
in which old Roman statues spring to life.
My young friend Ben, if I am only spared
a few more years, I'll show how one can take
Rafe Holinshed's raw blood and thunder tales
and make usurping monarchs sweat and shiver
at stalking ghosts and feel remorse like cramps.
I have a full-sailed plot about a wronged
but moody prince who should have been a poet.
O Ben"

He stopped and clamped a hand across
his mouth. He broke into the worst of all

his coughing fits. I hoisted my limp friend, moist still with sweat, across my shoulder once able to tote a load of bricks. I found his lodging was a drafty attic room. I paid his landlady, a slattern crone, for mutton stew and bread. I've wondered if my half crowns merely bought more gin for her. I sent more later with a small bouquet of marigolds, sun-ripened honeysuckles. Those Midland posies should have brought some rhymes of thanks. Perhaps he was too sick to write and I too quick to think he guzzled up my gift. Too late I know I should have made another visit. 'T was the last time that I saw my dreaming bard. Over the long dark nights and cloudy days of life I've known more drunken poets than most men, all talking about resounding dramas they would write. That Bankside Victim haunts my dreams most often: he died alone that week up in his garret. No fellow dramatist was at his side, no friendly bawd. We lack the last details a literary scavenger recorded when Greene lay gasping four years earlier.

Act Five: now I'm beginning to remember. My friend was somehow tied to Robert Greene but not a scholar of his Cambridge circle. Greene knew his Latin and his Greek, was one of our lightning wits, true bard and yet before he died, growling into his wild red beard how actors made their fortunes on his plays, he trudged the streets to beg for a penny pot of Maimsey. He had sold his sword and hose for just three shillings. Greene still owed his landlord ten pounds, the equal of two life's blood plays. A hardluck Henslowe hirling, Henry Chettle, dropped in to see Greene's bawd, left us a sketch of the poet's deathbed and paid her a trifle for rambling memoirs, Greene's Groatworth of Wit. A younger man, my Midland Bard, you see, revised and far improved Greene's Henry Sixth.

"There is a upstart Crow," wrote Envy's pen, "now beautified with feathers filched from us. He has a Tiger's heart that's wrapped within his Player's hide. This Midland Crow supposes he's able to bombast blank verse as the best of you, in his conceit the only Shake-scene" There is that name at last! That breath of Spring! My star-crossed dramatist whose life's short voyage

was bound in shallows and in miseries
was tarred by Greene four years before he died:
"in his conceit the only Shake-scene in a country."

It is the single printed comment that remains
of our green hope, Shake-spear -- Sweet Will, for short.
He never reached his harvest years to write
about his hesitating Danish prince
or that Scots king and his remorseful queen
from Holinshed. His early stuff oft sparkles,
marred here and there by immaturities
for he was dead six years before Queen Bess.

The Epilogue: too many plays, Young Man,
are still in tattered, fading manuscripts:
job work and treasures may be lost forever.
We didn't print our newest in those days
since rival troupes flew flags of skull and bones.
My Stratford Bard's sole published works were six:
that gory Titus, which could be forgotten;
his two Ovidian tales that you can find
in musty shops around St. Paul's along
with two historicals, both somewhat crude:
the thunders of the hunchbacked, cruel Richard
and John. Far better is a pirate's quarto,
Young Romeo and Julia. Hunt down
old Players, ask to see their crumbling scripts.
You might discover gems beyond the dreams
of poet-sultans: Shakespear's Jew of Venice,
King Richard Two, that final Marcus Brutus
and so rescue them from oblivion.

-- Walter Snow

Coventry, CT

Notes -- Archaic words needing translation: Geese were
prostitutes; Stews, brothels; and a Groat, as in
"Groatsworth," a thick silver coin worth four pennies.